

A's News Clips, Friday, January 28, 2011

A's not giving up on outfield prospect Chris Carter

By Joe Stiglich, jstiglich@bayareanewsgroup.com

Many reporters were on hand to interview Chris Carter on Thursday at the A's preseason media day.

That shows interest remains high in the power-hitting outfielder, even as his stock appears to be low in the eyes of the A's brass.

No one in Oakland's front office has uttered a negative word about Carter, the team's top prospect a year ago. But the A's aggressive action this winter in trading for outfielders David DeJesus and Josh Willingham carried an unspoken statement on Carter's status.

After a late-season trial run as the starting left fielder. Carter is not viewed as the answer to the A's power-hitting woes. Or their answer in left field.

At least not yet.

"I'm still thinking it's my job to lose, basically," Carter said of left field. "It's a business. They want to win and make the team better. (Adding players) keeps it more competitive."

DeJesus and Willingham are projected to man the corner outfield spots around center fielder Coco Crisp, with Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson expected to be the fourth and fifth outfielders.

That scenario likely has Carter, 24, ticketed for Triple-A Sacramento to start the season for the second year in a row.

And while little debate has taken place about the positive impact of adding DeJesus and Willingham, Carter was once thought to make such acquisitions unnecessary.

But he hit .186 with three homers and seven RBIs in 70 at-bats with Oakland last season. After enduring an 0-for-19 funk in August and returning to the minors, he looked more comfortable upon his return. He hit two homers with five RBIs in his final four games.

"He just needs to keep getting experience," A's manager Bob Geren said. "Every level he's gone, he's struggled early and then figured it out and succeeded."

Despite the A's busy offseason, indications are that they might not be done shaping the roster. A source with knowledge of the situation said the A's are trying to trade for Seattle infielder Chone Figgins, and that current A's third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff and perhaps a pitcher could be shipped to the Mariners in return.

The A's pursued free agent third baseman Adrian Beltre this winter, and they claimed Edwin Encarnacion off waivers but didn't retain him. So clearly, they're not completely sold on Kouzmanoff.

Figgins, 33, hit just .259 as Seattle's second baseman last season, but he did steal 42 bases. He's played mostly third base in the past and could handle the position. But he also has \$26 million left on his contract through 2013.

Geren said he hasn't decided on his batting order, but he wants to use the right-handed hitting Willingham to break up a glut of lefties near the top of the lineup. One likely look would have the switch-hitting Crisp leading off, lefties Daric Barton and DeJesus hitting second and third, with Willingham cleanup and lefty Hideki Matsui fifth. "... Willingham was one of several A's at media day displaying the bright gold jerseys the A's will use as alternate home jerseys, replacing their black ones. The gold jerseys are trimmed in green with the A's emblem on the left side of the chest. His impressions of the gold? "I think it blinded me a little bit." "... The A's have made a bid to buy their flagship radio station KTRB, but vice president of communications Ken Pries said he has no idea when to expect to hear final word.

Gary Peterson: A's future, and uniforms, are bright as gold

By Gary Peterson, Oakland Tribune columnist

The A's future is so bright, they have to wear shades. Or perhaps the new uniforms are an issue.

"It's blinding me right now," offseason acquisition Josh Willingham said Thursday, clad in a screaming gold jersey at a meet and greet with local media.

Have you heard the news? The A's are apparently back in the baseball business. Willingham, an assertive bat obtained from the Washington Nationals last month, was just one of the new pieces showcased in the Coliseum's East Side Club.

Reliever Grant Balfour was another. Right-handed starting pitcher Brandon McCarthy was another. Holdovers Brad Ziegler, Josh Outman and Kevin Kouzmanoff were on hand, as were manager Bob Geren and members of his coaching staff.

The sky was clear. The temperature was mild. Spring training was visible as a spec on the horizon. When it comes to sunny optimism as it relates to the local nine, it can hardly get better than that.

The problem with the A's the past four years is that January was about as good as it got. But this year will be different, or so the brochure says.

"This is the deepest, most talented team we've had," Geren said. He might be right. His first four A's teams averaged 76.8 wins -- 11th among the 14 American League teams, and third in the West.

Those teams seemed to lack form as well as function. Eric Chavez was the third baseman, except that he wasn't. Matt Holliday was the clean-up hitter, but only until he was peddled on the open market. The Next Great Thing would arrive from Triple-A Sacramento on a Tuesday afternoon, and be shipped back on Sunday evening. And don't get us started on the disabled list.

"You know the story," Geren said. "The injury train got out of control."

At this point, on a sunny January day, you can make out the vague outline of a well-considered roster. Take the outfield. Coco Crisp and newcomer David DeJesus are more than adequate as top-of-the-lineup guys and fly-chasers. Willingham knows his way around the heart of the order. Ryan Sweeney and Conor Jackson provide depth.

"Of the five, not one played the entire season (in 2010) because of injuries," Geren said, before someone else could say it first.

Designated hitter Hideki Matsui, a free-agent signee, is no longer Godzilla. But he's a marked upgrade over Jack Cust, who has struck out in 39 percent of his 1,812 major league at-bats.

It wouldn't be a shock if the holdover infield of Kouzmanoff, Cliff Pennington, Mark Ellis and Daric Barton started on opening day.

Returning starting pitchers Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez, Dallas Braden and Brett Anderson were a combined 51-37 last year. McCarthy and Outman are among those who could contend for the fifth spot in the rotation. Set-up men Brian Fuentes and Grant Balfour have been added to buoy All-Star closer Andrew Bailey. Ziegler, Breslow and Michael Wuertz are back for more.

"There's not a CC Sabathia on the staff," Willingham said, "but it led the league in ERA (in 2010) with an average age of 23." More like 25.7, but we'll cut Willingham some slack; he's new here.

Strong pitching at both ends of the game. Functional hitters. Top-drawer defense. Don't laugh -- the A's ranked second in the American League last season in the new-age Ultimate Zone Rating, trailing only Tampa Bay. (For us flat-earth types, Oakland was fifth in the league in fielding percentage).

This is starting to sound like the pie-in-the-sky flattery we were dropping on another local team about this time last year.

"I guess you could make a parallel (to the Giants) with what we did (this offseason)," Geren said.

"They've put together a team without a lot of superstar-type guys," Willingham said, still speaking of his new team in the third person, "but one that has a chance to win every night."

No, the A's haven't constructed a dynasty. But general manager Billy Beane has constructed the framework of a team that might win more games than it loses. Hey, it beats a stack of hopes and dreams piled high on Ben Sheets' right shoulder.

"Playing four years in Florida, and three years in Washington," Willingham said, "there was not a whole lot of talk about winning division titles. It's exciting at this point, before the season, to have expectations."

And worth its weight in gold -- screaming or otherwise.

Source: Oakland A's trying to trade for Chone Figgins

By Joe Stiglich, Oakland Tribune

A source with knowledge of the situation said the A's are trying to trade for Seattle infielder Chone Figgins, and that current A's third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff and perhaps a pitcher could be shipped to the Mariners in return.

The A's pursued free agent third baseman Adrian Beltre this winter, and they claimed Edwin Encarnacion off waivers but didn't retain him. So it's clear they're not completely sold on Kouzmanoff, who hit .247 with 16 home runs and 71 RBIs for the A's last year.

Figgins, 33, hit just .259 as Seattle's second baseman last season, but he did steal 42 bases. He's played lots of third base in the past and could handle the position. But he also has \$26 million left on his contract through 2013.

Depth has A's pondering life as a contender

Ten players and several coaches met with media on Thursday

By Jane Lee / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The A's aren't quite ready to shed themselves of the constant shadow that, for multiple years running, has been the underdog status.

They kinda like it that way, anyway.

But after an offseason that resulted in several upgrades, curiosity has them wondering what life is like as the favorites of the golden coast.

After all, they could very well be just that entering the 2011 campaign.

"I know that if I was on the outside looking in," newcomer Brandon McCarthy said, "I'd certainly think this was a team that is a force to be reckoned with."

The typical ingredients -- pitching, defense and a respected lineup -- are there, no doubt. The evidence is found in the likes of a formidable starting staff that compiled the league's best ERA last year, along with an elite bullpen and an offense that welcomed David DeJesus, Josh Willingham and Hideki Matsui over the winter.

"The opportunity is there for this team," Willingham said. "Obviously, it's all on paper at this point. Nothing's been proven. Any time you have expectations coming into a season, it's exciting."

What could separate this small-market team from its wealthier division counterparts, however, is an often overlooked, yet equally valuable element.

"I think we're more talented this year, definitely," manager Bob Geren said. "But I think our depth is going to be the biggest difference between wins and losses."

That notion was repeated time and time again at media day on Thursday, when 10 A's players, along with several coaches, relayed that super-sized dose of optimism only found but once a year before the first pitch has been thrown.

"You can see the effort they've made to go out and get a lot of good, name players," newcomer Grant Balfour said. "I'm confident we can go out and win the division. Sitting here today, looking around, I think we've got a good shot. There [are] some good teams in this division here, but I really believe we can go out and have a chance."

Every big league team likes to think they have depth. The A's are no different, nor have they ever been. But depth doesn't always come in the form of extra outfielders like Ryan Sweeney, Conor Jackson and Chris Carter. And it's not every day the fifth starter spot boasts more than two above-average candidates -- see McCarthy, Rich Harden and Josh Outman, among others.

"It never hurts to have too many guys," Balfour said. "There's definitely a lot of competition, but competition is good. It's the way you're reminded of your character. You can't ever be complacent. You have to keep working hard, no matter what type of deal you sign or the length of it. You always have to continue to work hard. With those contracts come expectations."

Expectations will unquestionably be higher for this A's team, the same one that finished the 2010 campaign with four straight wins and an 81-81 overall mark. There's no telling whether the same injury-ridden story will again be on display (the A's used the disabled list 23 times in '10), but thanks to an overstocked roster, there's really no excuses to be made this time.

"The last few years going into Spring Training, we had a good team," Geren said. "You're dinged up and a few injuries here and there -- and you know the story of the injury train that got out of control there for awhile -- and we could never recover. The difference between this offseason going into Spring Training and last is we have a lot more depth in just about every single department.

"We're doing everything we can to get guys healthy and strong to withstand the long 162-game schedule. But we also have a real advantage this year, where if a couple guys do get dinged up, we have a lot deeper bullpen and outfield. So we're pretty excited about what we have. Our talent level has gone up, and our depth has gone up."

Whether it's enough to bring the A's to the playoffs for the first time since 2006 has yet to be seen. But even for guys without job security, it's fun to think about. Just ask Harden, who doesn't mind that his return to the A's might not exactly mean a return to the rotation but, rather, the bullpen.

"There's just a ton of depth everywhere you look, in the 'pen and in the rotation," Harden said. "From top to bottom, it's easily the best pitching staff in the big leagues. I don't think anyone would disagree with that. It seems like we're capable of doing something special with what we have here."

"There's so much young talent here, and so much positive momentum that's being generated," McCarthy added, "that you feel like you're coming into a good situation."

A's unveil new gold alternate home jerseys

By Jesse Sanchez / MLB.com

OAKLAND -- The A's have gone gold.

On Thursday, the club unveiled its newest look for the 2011 baseball season, a gold jersey that will serve as the alternate home jersey to the traditional white uniform.

A's general manager Billy Beane referred to new look as "canary yellow."

Added reliever Jerry Blevins, "It might be hard not to notice us now."

Fans also looking to get noticed in the new jersey should keep an eye on oaklandathletics.com/shop, because they will be available for purchase in the next few weeks.

As a reminder, A's single-game tickets go on sale Saturday, Jan. 29 at 9 a.m. PT at oaklandathletics.com.

Cohn: A's might matter again

LOWELL COHN, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

When you think about the A's you must use the word "obscure." They have become the other baseball team in the Bay Area and it's largely their own fault.

They did not build a championship team and they watched last season as the Giants won the World Series. The A's had no stars and almost no recognizable names. Their job this season is to become unobscure. That may not be a word, but you know exactly what I mean.

The A's held a media day at the Coliseum on Thursday. The coaching staff and some players attended and the idea was to declare, "These are our guys and they can play."

They probably can. Check out some of these 2010 A's facts. They won 81 games. It's not a terrific number but it's a start — the A's hope it's a launching point. The A's finished ahead of the Angels. The Angels no longer are the ANGELS!!!, but they're still an elite franchise. The A's had the lowest earned run average in the American League — no kidding — and their starting pitchers averaged just 23 years of age. Clearly they are following the Giants' template — great pitching and enough hitting and whoopee.

Last season, the A's did not have enough hitting. But they added Hideki Matsui, David DeJesus and Josh Willingham — more on Willingham in a moment. These three are better than anyone on the A's last year. Jack Cust hit with power but he didn't get on base enough, didn't hit consistently with men on base. These players will.

Back to Willingham. He came to the A's in an offseason trade and when he met the media, he started interviewing himself:

"How do you feel to be an Oakland A?" he asked himself, followed by, "What do you think the ballclub's going to look like in spring training?"

These are two old standards and Willingham's use of them showed he's been around and has a playful sense of humor.

Then he answered his questions.

"Well, I'm very excited to be part of this organization," he said and he laughed at the pure silliness of what he was doing. He paused and said, "You guys just ask the questions and I'll answer."

We assured him he was doing better without us.

"Well, I think any time you come to a new team and find out they led the league in ERA, that's exciting," he said. "When you look at the upgrades this team has made offensively and in the bullpen, that makes you excited. From my perspective playing four years in Florida and two years in Washington, there wasn't a whole lot of talk about contending for a division title. The opportunity is there for this team. Obviously, it's all on paper at this point."

Willingham clearly did his homework and knows the A's have improved. They also added relievers Brian Fuentes and Grant Balfour (Ball Four Balfour? Sorry, I couldn't resist). Like the Giants, they have a lock-down bullpen. But Willingham admitted it's "on paper." The A's are what he calls an "under-the-radar type of ballclub" — as in obscure. They have potential they must turn into reality.

Willingham, an outfielder who probably will bat fifth, answered more questions, ones the writers asked.

"Describe yourself as a hitter."

"I'm a guy that's going to bring some power to the lineup. I'm going to get on base. I'm just not trying to do anything I'm not capable of."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm not going to try and steal 35 bases a year. I have some power. I don't have light-tower power. I tend to pull more balls than hit balls to the opposite field. My home runs you'll see will probably be pulled. I'm a guy that likes to see some pitches and make the pitcher work a little bit. When I get into the count a little, I tend to be more successful. I'm going to take my walks and have an on-base percentage that's respectable. I take pride in not swinging at bad pitches. My objective is get a

pitch to hit and when you get a pitch to hit, a lot of times that means getting behind in the count because you're not going to swing at a couple of pitches they put on the corner for a called strike."

As you can see, Willingham is a prototypical Oakland A's player. He goes deep into the count. He is patient. He is unemotional. He isn't a superstar but he could hit 20 to 25 home runs and, if the team is good, his power will matter and the A's might make the playoffs and, finally, they could stop being obscure.

Rebuilt A's gear up to contend for AL West

By Janie Mccauley, AP Baseball Writer

OAKLAND, Calif. — Outfielder Josh Willingham has no trouble saying it in January: The Oakland Athletics should contend for the AL

Manager Bob Geren expects it, too. That's how most teams feel heading into spring training and a new year, with fresh faces and have had such a busy, productive winter of upgrades and acquisitions that it seems — on paper, anyway — they could greatly improve

"This team is definitely capable of doing something special with the talent we have," said pitcher Rich Harden, back for a second season

Oakland, with a talented pitching staff and quiet offense, finished second to AL champion Texas last year despite another injury-filled season. The A's led the AL in ERA (3.56) and shutouts (17) while holding opponents to a .245 batting average.

Playing well into October would be a big step forward for this blue-collar franchise that hasn't reached the playoffs since being swept in the 2006 AL championship series.

Willingham has never been to the postseason, period.

"I know from my perspective, playing five years in Florida and two years in Washington, there wasn't a whole lot of talk about contending for a title," Willingham said Thursday at an A's meet-and-greet session. "The opportunity is there for this team. Obviously it's all on paper. Nothing's been proven. Any time you have expectations coming into a season it's exciting, especially when you've been on teams with high expectations."

Oakland brought in Willingham, slugger Hideki Matsui and David DeJesus to boost a lineup that hit just 109 homers and scored 666 runs, the team's second fewest in the last 28 non-strike seasons.

While Geren won't provide a batting order at this early stage — "I haven't even wasted my time with that yet," he quipped — he is confident in his thought. Willingham, who joined the A's in a trade from the Nationals last month, will bat somewhere third-fourth-fifth to break up

"Yo don't have a (Albert) Pujols in there, a flat-out superstar, but if you look at this lineup you have balance," Willingham said.

He batted .268 with 16 home runs and 56 RBIs last season. Willingham finished last season on the 60-day disabled list as he recovered from his left knee. He was sidelined after Aug. 15 and played 114 games, 108 of those in left field.

In fact, Oakland's other outfielders also missed time because of injury last season — Coco Crisp, Conor Jackson, Ryan Sweeney and Jason Kipnis all missed months with Kansas City following right thumb surgery.

The A's used the disabled list 23 times in 2010, two shy of the franchise record set in 2008.

That's why Geren is thrilled to have options almost everywhere. Oakland last week added Grant Balfour and Brian Fuentes to an already deep rotation, and back an experienced rotation.

"The last few years going into spring training we had a good team," Geren said. "You know the story of the injury train that got out of control while and we could never recover. The difference between this offseason going into spring training and last is we have a lot more depth in every single department.

"We're doing everything we can to get guys healthy and strong to withstand the long 162-game schedule but we also have a real depth where if a couple guys do get dinged up we have a lot deeper bullpen, outfield. So we're pretty excited about what we have. Our rotation and our depth has gone up," he said.

Despite 2010, A's still have significant edges in Bay Area success

Sam McPherson, examiner.com, 1/28/2011

Sure, Oakland Athletics fans could challenge San Francisco Giants players to a fight, but why bother?

All any sane East Bay baseball fan has to do is point to the hardware.

While the Giants finally won a World Series after going 52 seasons without one in San Francisco, the Oakland A's have won four World Series in their 43 seasons in the East Bay.

Do the math: four in 43 is a lot better than one in 53, even if that one is the most recent.

So why bother picking a fight or even listening to the blather coming out of San Francisco right now? Unless the Giants can win the next three World Series, too, they're not going to be able to match the A's on-field success for many years -- if ever.

Odds are the San Francisco organization was going to win a World Series eventually, anyway -- even the Florida Marlins have won more World Series than the San Francisco Giants, after all.

And by the way, only two teams have ever won three straight World Series: the New York Yankees and the Oakland Athletics. So the Giants probably won't be winning three straight, let alone four.

In fact, the San Francisco Giants have only four World Series appearances *total*, while the Oakland A's have four World Series championships. Overall, the A's have been to six World Series since they moved to Oakland in 1968.

Advantage: Oakland, again. After all, six league pennants in 43 years is also better than four league pennants in 53 years.

Just being in the playoffs has been a relative rarity for Giants, too, since they left New York City in 1958. In their 53 seasons in San Francisco, the Giants have nine total playoffs appearances.

In 43 seasons in Oakland, the A's have been to the playoffs 15 times.

Advantage: Oakland, again. Going to the playoffs, on average, once every three years beats going to the playoffs one every six years. Basically, the Oakland A's have been to the playoffs twice as often as the San Francisco Giants.

Funny how you never hear that fact coming from the marketing department at AT&T Park.

Finally, in pure terms of winning the division, the A's have won the American League West 14 times. Meanwhile, the Giants have won the National League West only seven times. So, since divisional play began in 1969, Oakland has won their division twice as often as the Giants have won theirs.

Advantage: Oakland, again.

Throw in the A's head-to-head advantage over the Giants in both regular- and postseason play (47 wins for Oakland, 39 wins for San Francisco), and it's an open-and-shut case: Oakland has always been better than San Francisco on the baseball field, even if the Giants happened to have won the World Series in 2010.

The blind squirrels find acorns once in awhile, too, so there is no need for the stronger squirrels to fight them over a lone nut. After all, it'll probably be years before they stumble across another one.